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Tamils In Re Union: Losing Cultural Identity

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There is hardly any country in the world, which does not have an Indian element in its population. So wide is its spread that it could rightly be said that the Sun never sets on the Indian population.

Among the Indian Diaspora, Tamils form a substantial minority - 8 million out of 35 million. They constitute the overwhelming majority of the Indian population in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore and Reunion. They are in good numbers in Myanmar, Indonesia, South Africa, Mauritius, Seychelles, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, Australia, New Zealand, Gulf countries, England, United States, Canada and European Union.

It would be simplistic and naïve to assume that the problems that these people face and what the future holds for them are identical. Their future is closely intertwined with the nature of their migration, their numerical numbers, their educational status, their professional attainments and above all, the majority – minority syndrome in the countries in which they have settled.

Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore form one category. Tamil language is recognized as one of the two national languages in Sri Lanka; it is one of the official languages in Singapore; and in Malaysia the government has introduced Tamil as the medium of instruction in primary level and as an optional language in higher levels. As a minority the Tamils share political power; there is religious freedom, though in Malaysia increasing signs of religious intolerance are becoming evident. Tamil media is vibrant and geographical contiguity with Tamil Nadu has enabled the Tamils to maintain close linkages and keep Tamil identity.

In Myanmar, Indonesia, South Africa and in Reunion the situation is very different In Myanmar those who rule the country are trying to build

the nation on the basis of their language and religion. When a Tamil child is enrolled in the school the child has to take a Burmese name. Hindu women have to wear Burmese dress when they go to office. There are no facilities to learn Tamil language. Tamil children, therefore, are losing their linguistic roots. In South Africa majority of the Tamils have lost their linguistic skills, the language of communication and medium of education being English. However, there is complete religious freedom. India's policy of isolating the apartheid regime meant no contact between India and South Africa for a long time. In Indonesia Bahasa Indonesia is the national and official language and the Indian community speaks only in Bahasa.

Mauritius has an active Tamil community. Tamil is taught in schools and Tamil culture, literature and practices abound. There are many Tamil temples which keep Tamil cultural and religious practices alive. The Government encourages and participates actively in functions organized by the Tamil community.

Reunion represents the most pathetic case. Tamils have already lost their cultural and religious identity. However, what is heartening is the new stirring within the community. There is a keen desire to find their cultural roots but the necessary sustenance is not coming forth from India and Tamil Nadu. The more perceptive among them feel that the present Government in New Delhi can and should positively respond to their longings and aspirations

Dr. Kalai Selvam Shanmugam, President, Tamil Sangham, Reunion was in Chennai recently. The Chennai Centre for Global Studies arranged an informal get together with those involved in the study and research on Tamil Diaspora. In his candid and frank presentation, Dr. Shanmugam described the nature of their migration, the trials and tribulations they underwent and how, despite heavy odds, the Tamil community has made a mark in the social, economic and political life of the county. In order to understand their problems, it is necessary to highlight certain realities about Reunion.

Reunion lies to the Southeast of Madagascar, 226 kms West of Mauritius and is 9000 miles away from Mumbai. Of the total population of nearly 800,000 people nearly 25 per cent are Tamils. When the institution of slavery was abolished in Reunion in 1848 the sugar cane plantation owners were keen to have continuous supply of docile cheap labour. They turned to Pondicherry, the French colonial possession, for this purpose. Under the indenture system large numbers of Tamil labourers were recruited. They were packed in decks in rickety ships, given unhygienic food, with no medical facilities. Many fell sick and died on the way. After reaching Reunion they were quarantined. Those who survived the quarantine were sent to sugar plantations, where they led a life of misery and were exploited from morning to night.

The prosperity of Reunion was built on the sweat and agony of Tamil plantation workers. In the late 19th and 20th centuries Gujarati Muslim merchants also migrated and they gradually began to monopolise trade and commerce in Reunion. It is interesting to note that today most Muslim women wear Western dress, though few of them have taken to Moslem dress and are putting on the veil.

Thanks to the initiative taken by Dr. Shanmugam and his colleagues in Reunion Tamil Sangham a plaque has been installed in the place

where Indian workers were quarantined. The English translation of the inscription reads as follows:

Homage

On this Thursday

30th October 1997,

Day of Deepavali,

We bring the light

To the first engaged Indians

Who died at this site

Two consequences of French colonial rule should be highlighted. Under French colonial patronage, Christian Missionaries, with bell, book and candle, arrived in Reunion and began to convert the Tamils into Christianity. A Tamil priest from San Thome Church in Chennai was taken to Reunion, who systematically began to denigrate Hindu religious practices. He mentioned that the custom of lighting camphor before the God was an illustration of black magic, whereas lighting candle in the Church was a sure way to salvation. By a combination of carrot and stick the Tamils were converted to Christianity. But so strong was the hold of the Hindu religion that conversion into Christianity did not lead to complete obliteration of Hinduism. Dr Shanmugam mentioned that in the rear portion of every Tamil Christian house, there was a small structure dedicated to Mariamman where they worshipped the village Gods and, on special occasions, offered animal sacrifices. Some sort of syncretic religion developed among the Tamils. This simultaneous practice of Hindu and Christian religious rites has earned them the appellation of “being socially Catholic and privately Hindu”. It is an illustration of the adaptability of Hinduism. The Hindus have the unique capacity to co-exist with people who follow other religious faiths or, what is unique about Reunion is the fact religious practices are an amalgam of Hindu and Christian religious rites.

As mentioned earlier, several Hindu traditions have been subsumed by Christian traditions. The cult of Mariamman has been absorbed into the worship of Virgin Mary. Janmashtami, birth day of God Krishna, is considered to be the date of birth of Jesus Christ. Saint Expedit, worshipped locally, is identified with Goddess Kali.

When I speak of syncretic nature of Hindu religion I am fond of mentioning the reality that in India the most melodious Hindu religious songs in Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada and Telugu are sung by a Christian, Yesudas. During the freedom movement, Gandhiji used to say that he was simultaneously a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist, a Jain, a Sikh and a Parsee. On one occasion Jinnah responded only a

Hindu can say that.

May I mention an incident from the post-independence history of Indonesia. In the late 1950's when the Pakistani Muslim leaders wanted to build bridges with Indonesia on the basis of Islam, Sukarno is reported to have told Z A Bhutto, " I am a Moslem by religious faith, but a Hindu by culture".

The second consequence was the introduction of French language in every sphere of life. All inhabitants of Reunion were required to take French names. For example, in Reunion Dr. Kalaiselvam Shanmugam is known by his French name, Docteur Chanemougame. French is the language of administration and also the medium of instruction. Though there are facilities for learning Tamil language as an optional language in few schools and in the University of Reunion, very few students learn Tamil. The language of communication is French.

France never considered Reunion as a colony, but as an overseas French possession, a distant province of France. As a result, people of Indian origin have been conferred French citizenship. Unlike Myanmar and Malaysia, there is no problem of statelessness. What is more, there have been no ethnic tensions and there is an air of peace and tranquility. The indentured labourers have broken their shackles, have risen high and are playing an active role in the political, social and economic life the country.

Language and religion are the two basic pillars of cultural identity. In recent years there are attempts to bring about cultural revival among the Tamils. The Tamil Sangham is playing a catalytic role in this direction. Pongal, Deepavali, Tai Pusam and other festivals are celebrated with gusto. With the BJP in power in New Delhi the desire to strengthen cultural bonds with Mother India and Tamil Nadu have increased. Dr. Selvam Shanmugam highlighted the fact that India, especially Tamil Nadu, can play a significant role in religious and cultural revival.

The integrationist policy pursued by France, under which Tamils were required to take French names, has now been relaxed. What is more, the proximity to Mauritius also has paved the way for cultural interaction. The religious breakdown of population in Reunion is not available, but according to many perceptive observers, majority of Tamils still follow Hindu religion. And, what is more, even the Christian community, cling on to Hindu customs and traditions.

Dr Shanmugam's lucid presentation was followed by a lively discussion. On the specific question of different religious practices co-existing in Reunion, it was felt that any attempt to project one form of worship to be superior to another form will create divisions within the Tamil Society. Sanskritisation is a slow and steady process and it will take a long time for the Tamils in the Island to give up their age old practices. It was further highlighted that Hinduism is a way of life, it has different philosophies and it encompasses different forms of worship. The linkages and diversities within Hindu religion have to be honoured and respected. The Rig Veda was the first sacred text in the world to proclaim the truth *Vasudaiva Kutumbakam* - the world is one family. There are numerous philosophies within Hinduism and their harmonious co-existence was epitomized by another Rig Vedic statement - *Ekam Sat, Vipra Bahuda Vadanti* – Truth is one, the learned interpret it in many ways. We have to uphold these principles, in theory and in practice, if we want to bring about a cultural revival among the Tamils in

Reunion.

The audience felt deeply pained when Dr Shamugam pointed out that some *Gurukkals* (Temple priests) brought from Tamil Nadu were more interested in making money than in spreading the gospels of Hinduism. The Visva Hindu Parishad must immediately take corrective steps in this matter.

Dr. Shanmugam highlighted and contrasted the policy being pursued by China in strengthening Chinese identity among the miniscule Chinese population. China, which has good relations with France, has opened Confucian Centres in Reunion; these Centres teach Chinese language to the local Chinese and also encourage their regular visits to China.

The first pre-requisite is to send a fact finding mission to Reunion. Antar Rashtriya Sahayog Parishad should constitute a small committee of scholars, well versed in Tamil culture and problems of Tamil Diaspora, and depute them to Reunion for an on the spot study of the problem. The report of the Committee along with recommendations could form the basis of our new policy towards Reunion. Simultaneously the Reunion Tamil Sangham should be invited to come to India; meetings should be arranged with Prime Minister, Minister for External Affairs, leaders of the Visva Hindu Parishad and allied organizations. The team should also undertake a tour of Tamil Nadu, visit important centres of religious and cultural significance and hold discussions with those in Tamil Nadu Government involved in policy making.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations should immediately open an India Centre in Reunion. The India Centre should be headed by a scholar well versed in the problems of Tamil Diaspora. Given proper leadership and support the India Centre could become the nodal point of cultural efflorescence.

Reunion, at present, has academic exchange programme only with Pondicherry University. The educational exchange programme should also cover International Institute of Tamil Studies; the Dravidian School of Linguistics and Madras and Madurai Universities. Scholarships, along with hostel facilities, should be offered so that young Tamil scholars from Reunion could come to India for higher studies. Arrangements should be worked out with cultural institutions like Kalakshetra and Nrityodaya so that talented students from Reunion could come to India and specialize in classical music and dance.

Tourism has considerable potential. The Department of Tourism should arrange cultural tours at regular intervals so that more and more Tamils come to India and learn about their glorious heritage.

Visual media – TV and Cinema- can play an important role in creating awareness about India's cultural heritage. TV serials like Ramayana and Mahabharata and films like Kandan Karunai and Thiruvilaiyadal have enormous potential to rejuvenate the Tamil community. These films, with French subtitles, should be shown in Reunion. At present local people have access only to Vijay TV. Steps should be taken to introduce other Tamil Channels also so that Tamils have access to good programmes. To begin with Doordarshan Podhigai could be

transmitted to Reunion via Mauritius.

The Government of India should persuade the Government of France to declare Deepavali, Pongal and Tamil New Year as national holidays in Reunion. This step would be welcomed by the Tamils and would also illustrate that the Government of Reunion is sensitive to the feelings and aspirations of the minority communities.

Dr. Shanmugam suggested that it will be a good idea if the Government of India provides facilities for the Tamils in Reunion to acquire Overseas Indian Citizenship. Dr. Shanmugam has acquired Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) cards. It was easy for him because he migrated to Reunion after independence; he had also the necessary documentation about date and place of birth etc. The eligibility criterion for OCI is as follows: The candidate should have migrated after independence, acquired the citizenship of the host country and is eager to acquire Overseas Indian citizenship. The application for OCI is made on an individual basis. The overwhelming majority of Tamils in Reunion belong to the third and fourth generation and, what is more, they do not possess necessary documentation. However, we can request the Tamil Sangham in Reunion to submit a memorandum to the Government of India on the subject. The Reunion Tamil community could solicit the support of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius to see if the Institute could assist in tracking their roots in India, which would facilitate their obtaining the OCI.

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